

## What is to Come

*Only those standing in death's shadow can truly taste the bitter limitations of mortality.*

Her senses sharpened as she fixed her attention on the gash in the darkening clouds. It looks as if some vast talon had torn them open. Through the slit bled the sunset. Saffron and crimson cut into black and cobalt, a wound carved across the sky, but one never to have the chance to heal.

She had done everything to bring about the change she believed was needed. Now, she would atone for the acts committed to make it all happen.

The world itself shuddered with her. Air tingled with static, and the ground trembled faintly as though the planet understood what was coming. Perhaps it did.

The impact struck hundreds of miles away, yet its force ripped the breath from her chest.

The sky twisted with the oncoming ruin. What had been a serene canvas of color became the backdrop of annihilation that broke across everything. Time slowed, each second drawn out as though the world was an hourglass refusing to spill its last grain. A wash of furious red burned away the night like a merciless dawn, unwilling to give night its turn. Trees emerged in stark silhouette against the glow, only to be erased in an instant by a blinding flash of white, chased by a tsunami of earth and shattered stone.

She thought to close her eyes, but in the end, she decided to watch her own end meet up with her.

It was the last decision she ever made.

*Planet Xilinx  
The Rozar Empire*

Bronte gasped, not realizing she had been holding her breath as the vision unfolded. She exhaled shakily before drawing in a steady lungful of air.

It was over. The final bell chimed, its echo fading softly. She had been on her way to her studies, cutting through the glass-enclosed corridor, when the images of massive destruction stopped her. Other tardy students rushed past, disappearing through the doors ahead. She was late for class, but, for the first time, she didn't care.

Instead of hurrying on, Bronte moved to the glass wall and leaned on it to sort out her thoughts. Far below, specks of people walked across the ground level, moving about as normal. Birds soared above the crisscrossing of the glass walkways that stretched between the steel towers of the university.

What exactly had she seen? A prediction? She had never experienced foresight before, and yet the terrifying event had played out vividly in her mind as if she were floating in the cosmos, watching the entire event unfold. A true out-of-body experience. Her hands trembled.

She clenched them into fists to calm their shaking.

“I need to consult with Grandmother,” she whispered.

Bronte pulled her interlink from her uniform jacket pocket. But, just as she was about to call for Grandmother Chiku, the device chimed.

“Grandmother?” Bronte answered.

“I sensed you were about to contact me.”

Bronte was hardly surprised. Chiku was a seasoned mystic.

“I need to speak with you in per—”

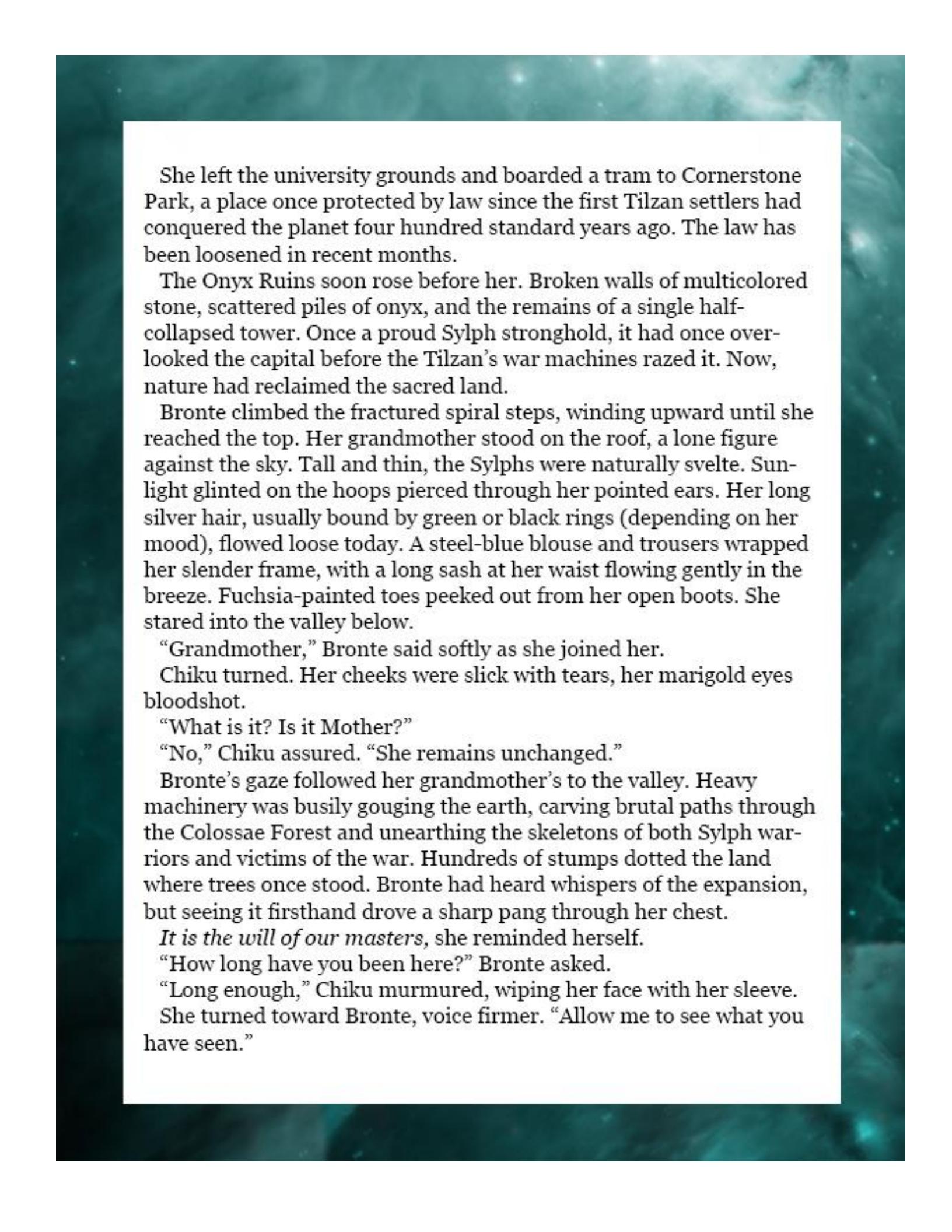
“—person,” Chiku cut in. “Yes. I understand.”

*How much does she already know?* Bronte wondered.

“You’ll find me at the Onyx Ruins.”

The screen dimmed like a fading heartbeat as Chiku disconnected.

Bronte lowered the interlink and sighed. She would face the repercussions of skipping class later.



She left the university grounds and boarded a tram to Cornerstone Park, a place once protected by law since the first Tilzan settlers had conquered the planet four hundred standard years ago. The law has been loosened in recent months.

The Onyx Ruins soon rose before her. Broken walls of multicolored stone, scattered piles of onyx, and the remains of a single half-collapsed tower. Once a proud Sylph stronghold, it had once overlooked the capital before the Tilzan's war machines razed it. Now, nature had reclaimed the sacred land.

Bronte climbed the fractured spiral steps, winding upward until she reached the top. Her grandmother stood on the roof, a lone figure against the sky. Tall and thin, the Sylphs were naturally svelte. Sunlight glinted on the hoops pierced through her pointed ears. Her long silver hair, usually bound by green or black rings (depending on her mood), flowed loose today. A steel-blue blouse and trousers wrapped her slender frame, with a long sash at her waist flowing gently in the breeze. Fuchsia-painted toes peeked out from her open boots. She stared into the valley below.

"Grandmother," Bronte said softly as she joined her.

Chiku turned. Her cheeks were slick with tears, her marigold eyes bloodshot.

"What is it? Is it Mother?"

"No," Chiku assured. "She remains unchanged."

Bronte's gaze followed her grandmother's to the valley. Heavy machinery was busily gouging the earth, carving brutal paths through the Colossae Forest and unearthing the skeletons of both Sylph warriors and victims of the war. Hundreds of stumps dotted the land where trees once stood. Bronte had heard whispers of the expansion, but seeing it firsthand drove a sharp pang through her chest.

*It is the will of our masters*, she reminded herself.

"How long have you been here?" Bronte asked.

"Long enough," Chiku murmured, wiping her face with her sleeve.

She turned toward Bronte, voice firmer. "Allow me to see what you have seen."

Before Bronte could respond, Chiku cupped her face, thumbs brushing her cheeks. Chiku's eyes soon clouded as she peered inward. Mystics, and sometimes ordinary people with a deep bond with mystics, could share visions this way.

Bronte's voice trembled. "Did . . . did you have a vision of it, too?"

The haze in Chiku's eyes lifted, and they returned to gold.

"It worked," Chiku exhaled, removing her hands. "The course will change." Relief softened her features and even curled a corner of her mouth into a smile.

"What worked? What has changed?" Bronte pressed. She wished she hadn't had the vision. It suddenly seemed all too real.

"In your vision, you must have been on an evacuation ship, watching the destruction from above," Chiku said.

"And you? Where were you in yours?"

A tree cracked in the distance, falling to the cutters. Chiku flinched.

The demolition clearly wounded her deeply. Even so, it was Sovereign Nalani Farah herself who had sanctioned it at her consort Gaius Celestial's request.

"It doesn't matter," Chiku said.

"But you saw it—the end of it all."

"Yes!" Chiku's voice cracked, sharp as glass. "I did."

Her sudden rigidity startled Bronte. The warmth drained from her grandmother's manner, replaced by cold distance.

"Does this mean I'm a mystic like you?" Bronte asked, hoping to soften her grandmother's tone.

"Not like me," Chiku said, wrapping her arms around herself. "Not yet. In time, your senses will sharpen."

Bronte placed a comforting hand on the older woman's shoulder. At seventeen, she was nearly her grandmother's height.

"Take ease, Grandmother. There is hope. Once we tell the sovereign, she will know what to do. She is our master, after all."

Chiku kept her gaze directed down at the scarred valley. The distant growl of machines and the crash of falling trees echoed up the hillside.

A sharp breeze stirred, scattering red and gold leaves across the ruins. The air was so crisp this time of year.

“You’re right,” Chiku said at last, her voice steadier. “The sovereign will know. You must return to your studies, but speak of this to no one. Understand?”

Bronte frowned. “You don’t want me with you at the citadel?”

“We saw the same vision,” Chiku replied curtly. “What more could you add?”

Harsh though it sounded, she had a point.

“What we need now,” Chiku added grimly, “is to survive what is to come.”

